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SPEECH  
OF  
HON. ZEBULON B. VANCE,  
OF NORTH CAROLINA,  
ON THE  
TARIFF—PUBLIC LANDS—PENSIONS.

DELIVERED IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, FEBRUARY 7, 1859.

The House being in Committee of the Whole on the state of the Union—Mr. VANCE said:

Mr. CHAIRMAN: The condition of the country is a rather singular one at this time. The statesman of enlarged phenomena might now behold many important events in the indications by which we are surrounded, could he but read them aright. The late fury of the political heavens having spent itself in the fierce and bitter contests which raged in these Halls, we have now a comparative quiet. But whether the winds merely pause to gather more wrath; whether it is merely a truce to enable the combatants to recruit and to bury their dead, we cannot tell. It may be that the now tranquil skies do but portend—

“A greater wreck, a deeper fall;  
A shock to one, a thunderbolt to all.”

But let us hope not. I, for one, am determined to interpret the omens for good. I think they are full of hope and peace and promise for the Republic. I hope, sir, that the lull is not a treacherous stillness, heralding the deadly simoon, but that it is Halcyon herself who comes to brood upon the dark and restless deep. Eight weeks of this session have gone by; grave and important questions have been discussed and passed upon; and yet harmony and good feeling have prevailed. Zeal there has been, but without fanaticism; warmth and spirit, but without bitterness and rancor. Though the bush has been beaten from Maine to California, from the Lakes to the Gulf, only the gentleman from Maine (Mr. WASHBURN) has been able to start a negro; and though the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. GIDDINGS) did howl upon the trail, the chase was so distant, and the scent lay so cold, that he soon called off, and the committee was not frightened from its propriety.

It behooves the Representatives of the people to take advantage of this hopeful state of affairs, and to turn their earnest attention to the practical every-day matters of the nation. Too long, already, has the country suffered from this all-absorbing excitement which has so much hindered practical legislation. Our disordered finances, our depressed trade, our empty Treasury, our confused foreign policy, our Secretary calling, like the daughter of the horse-leech,



“give, give;” all show this melancholly but instructive fact. The great question of a tariff, the principal source of our national revenue; the public lands; and, inseparable from these, the growing expenditures of the Government greatly need, nay, *must* have, our attention. It is time, sir, we were considering the ways and means to do something for the people—that vast and ever-striving mass whose servants and Representatives we are; by whose intelligent industry and unceasing toil, by whose early-rising and late lying-down this Government receives its protection and its bread, its glory and its prosperity.

When we reflect, sir, that the expense of administering this Government has reached a point far exceeding the receipts of the public Treasury, we most look around for some means of making both ends meet. I presume there are few members of this committee who desire to see the Government embark in a system of borrowing money, except in extraordinary cases of emergency, and thus lay the foundation of a great national debt like that of Great Britain, which is to go on growing and increasing until it gets forever beyond the hope of ultimate payment. The soundest policy of national financiers has been to borrow money only in case of war, or some such urgent necessity, to be repaid during the long years of peace and prosperity which follow these calamities. In times of general tranquillity it has always been considered best to draw upon the sources of the nation's income sufficiently to meet our current expenses without borrowing, no odds how much the amount might be. We are not now doing this: instead of living like a frugal housekeeper, on the interest of our money, we are devouring the principal. During the last fiscal year, in the midst of profound peace, this Government has issued Treasury notes and bonds to the amount of \$35,000,000 beyond the receipts of the Treasury, and a similar issue may soon be called for, unless the deficiency is levied on some source of the revenue. The tariff levied on importations is the principal source; the next largest is the public lands. Let us consider the former.

Shall it be raised to a revenue standard or not? That it is not now up to this point, is, I take it for granted—the opinion of many gentlemen to the contrary, notwithstanding—sufficiently obvious from the plain fact, that we are now living on borrowed money. This fact, for practical purposes, is worth all the theories that gentlemen can put forth in regard to the present rates. Sir, I am not philosophical on this subject; I have not made the laws which govern the trade and commerce of the world my study; I have not hunted up the statistics, nor counted with care the enormous columns of figures which contain our commercial transactions. I am free to confess it. Nor do I believe that I am much the worse for this reason. But crude and unelaborated as my opinions may be, I will venture to lay it down as an undisputed fact, that, as we are in debt and spending more than our income, and as our income is derived principally from the tariff, we have to do one of three things: either raise that income, lower our expenses, or walk into the insolvent court and file our schedule. I do not think there is, or ever was, a political economist on earth who could deny these propositions. It is a question, sir, entirely beyond financial theories and abstractions.

The doctrine, sir, of a tariff for protection has been pretty generally abandoned in the section from which I come; and it may not be amiss, perhaps, to say here, that one great cause of that doctrine being abandoned by those whom I have the honor to represent here—who once held it, was, that those very men whose interest and institutions, from a spirit of national pride, we were upholding and protecting, became in time the deadliest enemies to our institutions and to our interest. And it must be remembered, too, that at the time the doctrine of a protective tariff prevailed among my constituents, our national expenditures scarcely exceeded twenty million dollars per annum; and therefore the incidental protection afforded amounted to



scarcely anything, and made the necessity for protection obvious. But now that we have to raise from eighty to one hundred million dollars per annum, principally by duties on importations, the incidental protection afforded becomes so large as to render direct protection both uncalled for and unjust.

I am, therefore, sir, like those I represent, opposed to a tariff for protection, both for that reason, and also because it is to the interest of my section. I place it upon the ground of self-interest frankly, because I do not believe in the validity of the general rules and deductions which gentlemen lay down so fluently. To assert that the only true policy of a nation is free-trade, is only less absurd it seems to me than to assert that the nation should extend protection, universally, to all the manufactures within its borders. Trade and manufactures are, I take it, governed and affected like all other human transactions, by the thousand and one accidents and adventitious circumstances to which nations, as well as individuals, are subjected. What Adam Smith, and later British politicians, may say, in general terms, would have little more application to our condition, than would the maps and profiles of Professor Bache's survey applied to the angles and indentations of the British coast. Even in England, covering not more territory than the State which I partly represent, the public sentiment was never a unit on the tariff question; the manufacturer wanting it laid heavily upon articles similar to those in which he dealt, and free-trade as to breadstuffs and raw material; while the agriculturist contended for precisely the reverse. What French economists may say, can have still less bearing on our affairs as there is a still greater dissimilarity in our condition and institutions.

How, then, can we lay down a rule for the regulation of a tariff which shall be general in its operation for the best, for a country like ours, stretching, as it does, through all the degrees of an entire zone; with many thousand miles of coast; with every variety of soil, climate, and production; and containing within its borders artisans, manufacturers, and laborers, of every form, fashion, and profession under the heavens? There is, indeed, one general rule, which, though diverse in its operation, is yet the same in its applicability the world over—the universal law of self-interest. And, despite the ingenious theories of politicians, as to an enlightened public opinion having settled it this way or that, I will venture to say there is not a civilized nation or community now on earth, where the manufacturing interest is dominant, that does not seek protection for its workshops at the expense of its fields, and *vice versa*. This, sir, is another reason why I am opposed to a tariff for protection—that it would build up northern manufactures at the expense of southern agriculturists. We need no protection for that which we raise for market; and that which we have to buy, we want the free markets of the world to choose from.

But, be this as it may, we must have revenue tariff, or resort to direct taxation, which I am not prepared to do. In putting up the rates, then, to that standard, it strikes me that we should endeavor, not to protect any man, or set of men; but to protect the whole body of the people, from heavy or unequal taxation—for laying a tariff is, to some extent, laying a tax, though not an equal tax, as many of the States are now doing. The same principle ought to govern us. The cardinal doctrine of "the greatest good to the greatest number" ought to be our guide in laying these burdens upon the people. The same care to make them bear lightly as possible on the poor, yet without being unjust to the rich, which has ever been the ideal of a perfect tax bill, should be observed. Whilst I do not hold that the interests of the manufacturer and the consumer are necessarily and altogether antagonistic, to some extent they certainly are. If, therefore, that class of our citizens which produces the raw material of commerce, and consumes the manufactured article, is the larger and more extended interest of the country, and it most assuredly is; if it numerically and substantially predominates in fact, over the manufacturing interest,



then the genius of our institutions plainly demands that that predominance should be felt in the legislation of the country. I am not for sacrificing a smaller interest for the sake of a greater, in so many words; but I believe that all commercial enterprise should be, in a large degree, self-sustaining; and I cannot regard the operations of any institutions as healthful and vigorous, which flourish alone by statutory enactments.

But a tariff for revenue I am in favor of. It is a necessity at this time, and not an open question. If, in putting up the rates to meet the necessity, any protection should be incidentally afforded to the manufacturing interests, I can see nothing wrong in it. Indeed, if the rates are fairly imposed, without making a special discrimination against all the manufactories of the nation, I cannot see how it is to be avoided, if it were ever so sinful. We certainly should not be so illiberal as to refuse to them that which cannot hurt us, and which *may* help them. I certainly am not so hostile to my own country, or to any portion of it, as to desire to transfer what little protection is incidentally afforded by a fairly constituted revenue tariff, from our own manufactures to those of the British or the French, when my own people could not be in the least benefited thereby.

As to the manner of levying these duties, I am constrained to say that I concur with the President. I believe that the method recommended by him in his late message is the best, the simplest, and, in most cases, the fairest, at once for the merchant, the consumer, and the Government. A specific duty on any given article is a steady source of revenue; it is certain; it cannot be avoided or circumscribed; and if any protection arises from it, it is a home protection, and not a foreign one. It also puts to rest the difficulty as to home and foreign valuations, which always arises under the *ad valorem* system. That some protection will be afforded is inevitable, if the duties go up. Mr. Secretary Cobb says himself that he does not expect to see a tariff "framed on rigid revenue principles;" and both the President and Mr. Cobb seem to agree that the duties must go up, or we must borrow more money, which is not, they say, desirable. Indeed, the difference would be just the interest on the sum total borrowed in favor of increased duties. I must agree with both in this respect, and think it better to bring up the tariff at once to a revenue standard and be done with it, than to keep on gloryfying free-trade in the face of the facts and figures; for, although we are told to wait a little longer, to wait until the country has recovered from the great financial crisis which it has so recently undergone, I regard delay as the more dangerous course. How much, indeed, the present low duties have had to do in producing this very crisis, is, in my opinion, a question open to debate, to say the least of it. My own notions is, that California gold, for which we are not indebted to any kind of tariff, has alone kept us from calamities compared with which our recent troubles were small and insignificant.

But, although there may be a difference honestly entertained, among gentlemen, as to the best manner of regulating the tariff, it seems to me, sir, that there can be but one opinion in regard to the public lands—that other great source of our revenue. I am one of those who believe, with General Jackson, that these lands ought not to be made a source of revenue at all. I have a still stronger reason for disbelieving in the policy of keeping them, both as a source of revenue and as a corruption fund to control the politics of the country. I have heretofore acted upon the policy of distributing these lands among the several States of the Union, or their proceeds, in order to enable them to erect public works, establish free schools, and to bear the burdens of general improvement within their respective borders. I believe, if that policy had been adopted at the time it was first broached, that the wealth and prosperity of every State in the Union would have been materially enhanced, and the country saved



from much wrangling and bitterness, from many monstrous frauds and gigantic swindles.

But this policy was withstood by the Democratic party, which at a very early period, took ground against distribution, and declared that these lands ought to be held as a source of revenue, the proceeds poured into the public Treasury, and applied to defraying the public expenses, and would thus best inure to the use and benefit of the people. That party prevailed; and although under that disposition of the public lands, Virginia, North Carolina, and Georgia, which ceded their lands to the Government, until the lands thus ceded were all sold, continued, in reality, to pay five times more than their proportionable share of the public taxes; yet the public was everywhere met with praises of the justice and equality, as well as economy, of the system. From that time down to the last convention, which assembled at Cincinnati in 1856, every neighborhood, county, district, State, and national convention, so far as my recollection now extends, pledged the party, in the face of the nation, to oppose the distribution of these public lands, whether among States, corporations, or individuals; and saying that they ought to be applied to the use of the General Government, to relieve the people of taxation, and for no other purpose whatever. Nay, sir, the favorite term of expression was, that "the proceeds of these lands ought to be sacredly applied" to these purposes, thus giving a kind of religious sanction to the sincerity of the promise. When the advocates of distribution, defeated in so many struggles, had come almost to despair of obtaining their object, I, for one, felt that we were well consoled by being able to fall back upon these oft-repeated promises. I was cheered by the thought, that if we could not get a fair and equal distribution, we knew at least that the proceeds of the land sales were well disposed of; that they were "sacredly applied" to the general charge and expenditure. But, sir, even that consolation is taken away from me, and the actual reality stares us in the face.

During the last session of Congress, acting in obedience to a resolution, the Secretary of the Interior transmitted a report in brief, to the House, setting forth the number of acres disposed of, and for what purposes, since the inauguration of the present system. By that report it appears that (I quote from memory) about one hundred and twenty-nine million acres have been sold, and the proceeds applied (whether sacredly or not, we cannot now tell) to the public expenses; whilst, during the same period, there have been "sacredly" given away and squandered about two hundred and ten million acres! And this exclusive of military grants amounting to some forty-four millions! Some millions are given to build the magnificent railroad system of Illinois, which cannot be fairly construed to come under the head of "general charge and expenditure;" some millions more are handed over to Minnesota, to Iowa, to Wisconsin, and other northwestern States, for railroads, schools, public buildings, and so on. What construction other gentlemen may put on this, I am unable to say; but, in my opinion, the giving away of the common property to free States, to support those public burdens which my constituents have to pay out of their own pockets, is neither a part of the expenses of the General Government proper, nor is the object very sacred. To avoid tediousness I shall not enumerate the various States that have shared this public spoil, both North and South, or recite the various grants so sacredly donated to corporations and companies. They will all be found grouped over the sum total of two hundred and ten millions in the report referred to.

Is there any prospect of the evil being stopped? Why, sir, I was perfectly astounded to learn the number of bills now before the House for giving away lands. I sat in my place in this Hall, and heard the other day bills enough introduced to cover, as I thought, all the vacant lands on the North American continent. Many of them seemed to me to have reference to the prospective



annexation of all the nations, kindreds, tongues, and tribes, from the open Polar sea, beyond the region of eternal ice, to the Isthmus of Darien. There seems to prevail, in certain sections, a notion that our "manifest destiny" is to conquer territory, and then to give it away in lots and quantities to suit the convenience of applicants. Why, sir, no Spanish monarch ever gave away realms and barbarian empires which were not his to give, with so lavish a hand as we display in granting away annually millions upon millions of acres of the noblest land on earth, of which it is promised that the price of every acre shall be sacredly applied to a far different object. So wild has the infatuation grown, that, not satisfied with the splendid operations of States, corporations, and individuals, the nation has actually conceived the idea of swindling itself out of two hundred million acres to build a Pacific railroad. What an age we live in! But the brightest, most magnificent idea of all yet conceived, for getting rid of these lands, is the bill—which lately passed this House—of the honorable gentleman from Pennsylvania, which will give at least one hundred million acres to whoever will go and take it. No odds who it is; the invitation is general to all the world. "Walk up, gentlemen, and help yourselves!"

Now, sir, leaving entirely out of sight, the fact, that this disposition of the public property is a rank and gross outrage upon the rights of the old States, and a palpable violation of the spirit of the deeds of cession; is it not a reckless and ruinous waste of the public revenues? Is it not a strange way of redeeming a promise so "sacredly" made? What wonder, sir, that the tariff has to go up, when this great and unfailing source of public wealth is thus lavishly thrown away! If this fund is no longer to go into the public Treasury to relieve the people of the burdens of a high tariff; why then, in common justice and common honesty, let us all, the old and the new States, take share and share alike. I have long been a distributionist, because I thought justice and equality demanded it; but if I could only see these promises faithfully carried out, if I could only see this vast fund honestly applied to defraying the general charge and expenditure of a common Government, I would agree to ask nothing more. I call on gentlemen to stop this wild raid after the public lands. I will gladly stand with any party to effect this object.

It is a little strange that every State in the Union can participate in these land grants, save and except alone those States which were the original proprietors. The ordinary statute of distributions is entirely reversed; and the furthest of kin, instead of the nearest, seems to be best entitled to the estate. There is great anxiety manifested on the admission of every new State, to put it on an equality with the other States, by princely donations of the public property; but it never seems to occur to gentlemen that there is no equality in the case, so long as one half the States get nothing at all.

What do you call equality, and how do you bring it about? Do you call it equality when one party gets all and the other gets nothing? And do you produce this equality by loading one with favors and stripping the other bare? Nay, sir, worse still is done. The elder sisters of this great family of States, bring their advancements into hotch-pot, and the law not only gives the younger sisters the principal estate, but the advancements also, leaving the elder sisters without an inheritance in the common property. Truly, "from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath." And although the doctrine has been as strenuously maintained, that it was unconstitutional for the General Government to erect improvements not of a national character, in the respective States, the Secretary of the Interior shows us that four thousand six hundred and forty-nine and one half miles of railroad have been built, or provided for, by the Thirty-Fourth Congress alone. How many schools have been established, and how many public buildings have been erected by Congress in this way, the report does not show. It would take up all my



allotted time to show one half the donations to the new States, and for what purposes; therefore, I will forbear. Suffice it to say, that scarcely a single grant is not in direct contravention of this doctrine, whether right or wrong. And before I close this subject, I may be permitted to remark upon the strangeness of the fact, that no land bill has passed this Congress and become a law, which made provision for an equal division among all the States. The faintest shadow of justice and equality in a land bill is sufficient to "damn it to everlasting fame." Bennett's land bill could not get through, neither could the agricultural college bill of the gentleman from Vermont, (Mr. MORRILL,) and though the lunatic asylum bill got through Congress, it met its quietus on the ground of unconstitutionality, at the hands of a President who signed bills giving away lands enough to build four thousand six hundred and forty-nine miles of railroad, and many million acres beside for works of a similar nature!

But, sir, we are continually told that it becomes no man to talk about a waste of the public revenues, or to recommend economy, who voted for the old soldiers' bill; that that was a measure of such reckless and dangerous extravagance, as to completely shut the mouths of all who are anxious to promote a reform in our alarming expenditures. I am glad to hear that word economy coming from such gentlemen. I am delighted to know, sir, that Saul is once more among the prophets, though he come even "in such questionable shape" as a reformer; for if there ever was a time in the history of the Government, when retrenchment and reform were needed, now is that time. Put in the knife, sir, by all means. Let it be sharp and keen, and I will help and hold and cry, "Lay on, Macduff!" and well done, while the bright blade flashes right and left, reddening as it goes, among the foul ulcers of the body-politic, till the last one is removed.

But I do not wish to begin to economize in the wrong place. I do not wish, sir, to let the first stroke fall on the best, the noblest, the most useful part of the whole nation, the gallant soldiers of the war of 1812. What would be thought, sir, of the man who would begin to reform his household expenses, by giving a half-feed to his horse, his ox, and his plowman? Instead of saving money, sir, he would dry up the source of his wealth entirely; for in a short time, his plowman and his horse would be as weak as a politician's promises, as feeble as a modern platform. Such a man would hardly be termed a bad economist; he would be called a *fool*, and would deserve the appellation. He should commence by cutting off all the superfluous parts of his establishment first, so there might be no diminution in the comforts of those who labored. So, sir, we should begin in the national household, to lop off the superfluous excrescences that uselessly feed on the Treasury. We might profitably decapitate some thousands of that class of hungry hangers-on, who swarm in the land with the numbers and the rapacity of the Egyptian locust, "devouring every green thing." I contend, sir, that the citizen soldier is at once the pride and glory, the stay and the surety of the nation; and no Government is wise which refuses to contribute, in this way, to the fostering of that warlike spirit in its militia.

The gentleman from Ohio (Mr. NICHOLS) told us the other day, that this spirit originated solely in patriotism and devotion to our liberties, and that no greater insult could be offered to those gallant men than to put their services in the war of 1812 on a footing of dollars and cents. "Patriotism," said he, "is its own reward." What a pity it is that he is not as prompt to defend these men from real want as from imaginary insult! I would not do any soldier of that war the injustice to suppose for a moment that thought of the pay influenced him in the slightest. His country was in danger; that was enough for him. The bugle-blast told him that the invader's foot was upon the soil; and he went to the rescue. But this is all the greater reason why they de-



serve well at our hands. As they were prompt and brave to defend us, so should we be prompt and liberal to repay them. I do not believe that they are sufficiently repaid by the honor and glory they have acquired. Thousands of these men are now in the deepest poverty, and have the hardest work to keep the wolf from the doors of their homes, where dwell their wives and little ones. Can one of them walk into the market and buy a rump of beef or a leg of mutton, with glory? What merchant advertises that he will take either glory, honor, or renown, in exchange for beef, pork, and cabbage? I doubt, sir, if either the gentleman from Ohio or myself would agree to represent our constituents in this Hall, glorious as it is, without—to speak in Kansas technology—“an enabling statute.” You may talk of glory as much as you like, but these old soldiers want some more substantial testimonial of the country’s gratitude.

That argument, sir, reminds me of the custom, in Catholic countries, of having the priest to pass over the fields in the spring and bless the expected crop. On one such occasion, the priest being something of an agriculturist, paused at one field, which was very poor and sterile; “here, my friends,” said he, “blessing will do no good; this field must have manure.” The old soldiers, sir, value the glory they have acquired, no doubt; but they must have something that will do more good than empty fame.

Sir, I hope that gentlemen will not be guilty of the sin of so often taking the name of economy in vain, for the people will not hold them guiltless. I protest, sir, against making this word cover all the sins of the age. There are but few of these soldiers alive, and they are all necessarily far advanced in years. It is but now and then that you meet with one of them; and if we do our duty in cutting down our ruinous expenditures at the present session, the amount required to pay them will scarcely be felt. The bill provides no back pay, and only gives a small sum for life, graduated according to the length of the soldiers’ services. In my opinion, the vast amount so unwisely spent in the bloodless Mormon war, would be sufficient for this bill. I do earnestly hope that the Senate may consider it favorably, and that it may become a law.

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